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Fred Schlipf

Fred Schlipf

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Oral History Interview with Fred Schlipf,
at Urbana Free Library, November 4th, 2015
Conducted by Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan Archivist

Meg Miner: My name is Meg Miner: I'm the archivist at Illinois Wesleyan University and I'm working on a project that's currently titled "Portrait of a Collector-"

Fred Schlipf: Okay.

Miner: -a view from the shelves of Minor Myers Jr.," which is how I've been envisioning this. I see his portrait every day.

Schlipf: Okay.

Miner: Today is the 4th of November, and we are in the Urbana Free Library, and I'm here with Fred Schlipf. Is it okay to call you Fred?

Schlipf: Fred is much better.

Miner: Fred, okay. Well Fred, I thought we'd just start out by having you tell us how you knew Minor, how long, where, you know, in the world your paths crossed.

Schlipf: Well, I probably met him- let's see, about 1961 or 1962. We were in college together. He was a- he was a year younger than I am.

Miner: Okay.

Schlipf: And I got to know him best because he and his roommate had the room across the hall from my room in a kind of a little suite of rooms.

Miner: Okay.

Schlipf: So- and his roommate was a very interesting person, a guy named Dick Sommers, who was a military historian and later became- was on the staff of the National War College out in Pennsylvania.

Miner: Oh!

Schlipf: In fact, the last time I saw him was at Minor's funeral-

Miner: Oh my goodness.

Schlipf: -so it's been a while. But at any rate- so that was the environment.

Miner: And this was Carleton?

Schlipf: This was Carleton.

Miner: Okay.

Schlipf: That's right. And I remember the time that they had a- a simulation game of the navy war in the Pacific, and they had piled all the furniture in the room into one corner of the room when they had these many sheets of cardboard taped together with the capitol ships being pushed around.

Miner: Oh my goodness!

Schlipf: And this was like three days where they took over their living quarters.

Miner: Oh my!

Schlipf: And I suspect it was Dick Sommers' invention.

Miner: Uh-huh.

Schlipf: But- but Dick was a lot of fun. He was- he told me once, and I hope I'm quoting him right, that early in life he couldn't decide whether to specialize in the Civil War or the Napoleonic Wars, but finally in seventh grade he picked the Civil War.

Miner: [laughs] He knew early on.

Schlipf: And he didn't think that was unusual at all.

Miner: Oh, interesting. Hmm.

Schlipf: So he had collections of- of model soldiers lined up in his room and all kind of stuff.

Miner: In his dorm room?

Schlipf: In his dorm room.

Miner: And so were they ahead of you in school or-

Schlipf: No. They were a year behind me.

Miner: A year behind. Okay.

Schlipf: So like I knew them socially, and then my former college- this- my senior year I got a single but he was just down the hall, and Miner and I wrote and produced a Gilbert and Sullivan version of MacBeth-

Miner: Mmm.

Schlipf: -called The Road to Dunsinane-

Miner: Okay.

Schlipf: -in reference to the, you know, Bing Crosby-

Miner: Uh-huh.

Schlipf: -Bob Holt, Dorothy LeMoore films.

Miner: Oh, sure.

Schlipf: And so- so the premise was how can we make Macbeth all happy and singing, which took some doing. [Miner laughs] And you know, typical kind of things. So nobody dies and everybody gets married at the end.

Miner: Well, sure, and you have a trip involved in some ways.

Schlipf: Well, not necess- trip in what kind of way?

Miner: The road trip.

Schlipf: Well, we didn't have a road trip actually. The reference to the movie ended with the title-

Miner: Oh. Okay.

Schlipf: -'cause we needed some kind of snappy title.

Miner: Oh.

Schlipf: So yeah. But it was fun. And then the next year it was- it was done by University of Chicago by the Black Friars, which was their musical comedy group, and then a number of years later by a group up in Michigan-

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: -some summer group. For the one in Chicago, all three of us were there, but the one in Michigan I was the only one there.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: It was either health or other problems, but the other two authors couldn't make it.

Miner: Oh my goodness.

Schlipf: But that was- that was my big involvement with Minor-

Miner: And-

Schlipf: -in college was this musical. And basically Minor was the musician. He directed, organized all the musical parts of it. And I wrote most of the- most of the dialogue and my former roommate wrote most- wrote almost all of the lyrics.

Miner: Oh my! Do you have a copy of that still?

Schlipf: Yep, still have it. It's been through- it's been revised. Every time it's been done over we've revised it again.

Miner: Oh my gosh!

Schlipf: I can email to you if you want.

Miner: That would be fascinating.

Schlipf: I'll write it down.

Miner: That would be great. Thanks. Thank you. I have no idea what- what that will inform, but I would just really get a kick out of seeing it.

Schlipf: It's interesting, and Minor's greatest contribution doesn't show that much 'cause he didn't do a lot of the writing. He did all of the musical organizing, and all the directing and everything else.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: And- but he also set- he did a lot of battle settling 'cause the two other people, my former roommate and I, would propose what we thought were hilarious ideas and the other one would look at it and think, "Oh, I don't know about that." So Minor was the official designee to settle all these disagreements.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: And whatever he said, “No, I don’t like it either.” And if he liked it, the other person disagreeing lost.

Miner: Oh my.

Schlipf: So- and we- and we did it for this group in Michigan. Minor came over from Bloomington and three of us sat around my kitchen table and my former college roommate came from Seattle, and so the three of us sat around and did the same thing we had done decades before.

Miner: I was going to say. How long of a time span was that?

Schlipf: I’d forgotten when it was done.

Miner: Huh.

Schlipf: Maybe fifteen, twenty years ago maybe?

Miner Oh.

Schlipf: I could look it up and find out for you. It was produced in Michigan.

Miner: That’s-

Schlipf: But at any rate, Minor couldn’t make it there, but he did certainly used the same approach again. He would- my friend Gary and I would not agree on things, so we set a standing rule of two out of three votes. We had a lot of tie breakers.

Miner: Okay. And it was usually Minor doing the-

Schlipf: Minor was arbitrating-

Miner: -arbitrating?

Schlipf: -because Gary and I were usually the ones inventing these lunatic things and trying them out. And, you know, I think any kind of joke-writing is involved with thousands of discards.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: But Minor later, after Carleton did some- some kind of show, that he- out east somewhere, some kind of stand-up comedy show of some kind, he told me about it and I can’t remember the details.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: But he was always inventing things, and-

Miner: He was a jokester.

Schlipf: Yeah. But- but it's- somebody might know. Ellen might even know. Have you- have you talked with his- his- with Ellen?

Miner: I have not yet. I've been in contact with Minor III and hope to go out and see them in the spring. Yeah.

Schlipf: Great. I also sort of half-dated Minor's little sister for a while-

Miner: Oh, really? [laughs]

Schlipf: -so there's that connection as well. But-

Miner: I knew he had a brother but I didn't know he had a sister.

Schlipf: Sister, yeah. And she was a costume designer, but as you can imagine pretty and very bright.

Miner: Yeah. Yeah.

Schlipf: And...so-

Miner: How fun. So they weren't- they weren't from that area though.

Schlipf: Akron. Yeah.

Miner: Oh. I was going to say, I thought it was-

Schlipf: I thinking of the stories Minor told me. You know, they had a pipe organ in their basement. He was interested in pipe organs and that's one of the reasons he got pipe organs installed at- at the college was- and you've got a tracker organ, which was not a common thing, the modern tracker organ.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: That's pretty- pretty sophisticated equipment.

Miner: Huh.

Schlipf: At any rate, he got to know the pipe organ firms-

Miner: Uh-huh.

Schlipf: -and if they had a rank of pipes that were being discarded, they'd give them to Minor, and he put them down in the family basement and he found a compressor somewhere and so he played the pipe- and the big pipes were run horizontally 'cause there was just no space to run them vertically.

Miner: And this in the basement of Illinois Wesleyan?

Schlipf: In the basement- no. This was in the basement of their home in Akron.

Miner: Akron. Oh, okay.

Schlipf: He was in high school.

Miner: Oh my gosh!

Schlipf: Yep. So while he was in high school, he had a pipe organ in the basement.

Miner: Huh.

Schlipf: And he said the compressor wasn't very good and he had to put it in its own separate room through a hole in the wall so he could control the racket from the compressor.

Miner:

Schlipf: And I guess when he played it the whole hall shook 'cause it had, you know, twenty foot long pipes this big around.

Miner: Oh my word!

Schlipf: So-

Miner: Bet the neighbors love that.

Schlipf: I don't know. This is something- I never saw this. This is a story he told me.

Miner: Oh. Wow. Do you have- I mean, these are great stories. Do you- do you have a favorite memory of Minor or a way that you-

Schlipf: No, I- I don't think so. We spent a lot of time together 'cause we were across the hall from each other.

Miner: Right.

Schlipf: Yeah, and Carleton was a very studious place, and we had not quiet hours, but noisy hours. So from ten to ten thirty every night it was noisy hour and then everyone had to shut up again.

Miner: Huh.

Schlipf: And so during the noisy hour, all hell broke loose because everyone was really grinding. I figured that at Carleton I spent about sixty hours a week working outside of class-

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: -every week.

Miner: Wow. That's intense.

Schlipf: So it was a seventy-five hour a week.

Miner: And were you in the same program of study that-

Schlipf: No. He was in government and I was in history.

Miner: Okay. So you were more with- along with-

Schlipf: No.

Miner: -Dick Sommers then.

Schlipf: Right, and my college roommate was in math.

Miner: Okay.

Schlipf: So an interesting variety.

Miner: Boy, interdisciplinary right there.

Schlipf: This- Carleton was pretty selective, so everyone I knew scored ninety-five or up on the GREs.

Miner: Wow.

Schlipf: And practically I couldn't believe that were people who scored in the bottom two percent-

Miner: Oh!

Schlipf: -until I met a couple people who were in graduate school, but should not have been.

Miner: Well-

Schlipf: And any rate, Minor was, you know, obviously extraordinarily smart-

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: -and was interesting, and Dick Sommers was interesting with his unusual and intense interest in history.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: He- he named his suits after Civil War regiments.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: In fact, I think he named most of his clothes after Civil War units.

Miner: Oh my goodness!

Schlipf: He said I'm wearing the fourteenth Illinois Infantry and the second- second Virginia cavalry and naming the things he had on that morning.

Miner: That's so interesting. Did- did Minor ever talk to you about John Wesley Powell at Illinois Wesleyan?

Schlipf: No.

Miner: Okay. 'Cause he was a Civil War veteran and Minor took an interest in his relationship with Illinois Wesleyan. I was just wondering if there was a connection.

Schlipf: Yeah. So I knew Minor up through my graduation.

Miner: Okay.

Schlipf: And I kept in touch because I'd see his sister once in a while and so we'd keep in touch a little bit that way. And then we kind of lost touch with each other for a little while until he came to Wesleyan and somebody said, "You know, Minor is over here at Wesleyan."

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: So then we get back together and I had dinner two- three times in the President's house which I was very impressed with 'cause they had a cook.

Miner: Mmm. Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: That's not the lifestyle I'm used to...[Miner laughs]...and I went to- went to performances there and, you know, so- so I'd see him two- two or three times a year after- after he came to Wesleyan.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: But between when he was out east and becoming an administrator, we were really out of touch-

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: -and kind of resumed the friendship after he came to Illinois.

Miner: That's wonderful.

Schlipf: That's- it's so easy. It's an hour down the road.

Miner: Yeah. Yeah. That's very close.

Schlipf: Mm-hmm.

Miner: So when you- when you lost touch, he got married. I didn't look up his date when he got married, but it was certainly well after his-

Schlipf: Yep.

Miner: -his Carleton days.

Schlipf: I- I didn't meet Ellen until I met her Wesleyan.

Miner: Okay. So was he a collector already when you met him?

Schlipf: No.

Miner: Okay.

Schlipf: So I knew from visiting in their house all this seventeenth through eighteenth century stuff. I think eighteenth century, was it?

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: All kinds of books and musical instruments and so on.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: But not when I knew him.

Miner: Did you know how he came about that interest, becoming a collector?

Schlipf: No.

Miner: Okay. Do you- let's see. Did he- did he ever tell you- talk to you about what he was collecting or-

Schlipf: Not much, no. Because I was in his house, we'd comment back and forth-

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: -but it was- it was at the level of comment, not at the level of motivation.

Miner: Okay. Or understanding how he acquired or that kind of thing?

Schlipf: I think he- I think he- you'd remember this much better than I would, but I think he bought a lot of it in Europe.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: Like he'd come home with bales of stuff. But that's just a vague memory. I may be wrong.

Miner: Okay. I've- I've heard- one of the anecdotes I've heard is that he bought auction lots.

Schlipf: Okay.

Miner: And so, you know, part of what I'm interested in is, you know, that type of acquisition and- and what that means. Was he a big reader of these things?

Schlipf: I don't know.

Miner: Okay.

Schlipf: Well, at Carleton we read all the time.

Miner: Well, sure.

Schlipf: Because you know, I spent probably forty hours a week reading.

Miner: Uh-huh.

Schlipf: And the- and everything I took involved reading, you know, the kind of- I started out in the hard sciences and kind of and then I thought they'd bore me to death. [Miner laughs] It wasn't that they were hard to do. It was really dull.

Miner: Hmm. Hmm.

Schlipf: So I was going to be a chemist and I thought- I found out the life of a chemist is beyond human belief. Well, at least in laboratories. And my wife's a biologist and she just loves the laboratories-

Miner: Oh, interesting!

Schlipf: -and I could- one day, I washed up the glassware and said, you know, "This is it. I quit." And I went and changed majors the next day.

Miner: And that was in your second year?

Schlipf: End of my second year of college.

Miner: Second year. Hmm.

Schlipf: So I have two years of physics, two years of chemistry, two years of math, and two years of calculus and you know, nothing advanced just mid-level mathematics.

Miner: Good dabbling.

Schlipf: And then I decided I'm through, so- but for me it was the best decision I ever made.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: You know, I was director of this library for thirty-two years-

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: -and I had been on the faculty of Illinois for forty-five years and that was the place to be.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: And I was very lucky 'cause I could be an administrator and a professor both at the same time.

Miner: Oh, that's true.

Schlipf: And how often can you get that kind of deal?

Miner: That is so true.

Schlipf: And then 'bout twenty-five years ago I began consulting on library architecture for about a hundred and fifty buildings more or less.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: Or a hundred and fifty projects. Some of them are still stewing. [Miner laughs] Yeah. So that's my life story.

Miner: That's great. Well, so-

Schlipf: And- and I really can't answer any questions about his collections.

Miner: Sure. Okay.

Schlipf: Because I- I knew he had them and he showed me things, but we never had any deep talks about his collecting-

Miner: That's okay.

Schlipf: -and he wasn't doing it when I knew him at college.

Miner: Well, it's very helpful for me to know that and that's part of what I'm interested to know is how did this develop-

Schlipf: Mm-hmm.

Miner: -you know, so it's good to know that the starting point was after 1965. [laughs]

Schlipf: Right.

Miner: And I didn't know about his extensive traveling in- in Europe.

Schlipf: That's what I thought he said, but this is- this is my memory-

Miner: Sure.

Schlipf: -and it may be that he got it other ways. I just got the impression that he came back with it. If he got it by auction, that would be easier in a way 'cause you don't have to- to travel to get it.

Miner: Sure. That's true. You don't have to ship them.

Schlipf: So that I really- I can't answer, and this would be relying on my fractured memory, which is not a good idea. So I really- I really knew Minor best when he was in college and just fresh out of college-

Miner: Sure.

Schlipf: -a graduate student.

Miner: Okay.

Schlipf: 'Cause when the University of Chicago- when the University of Chicago did our play, he was a senior at Carleton.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: And just- so after that, until he came to Wesleyan our lives didn't overlap a lot.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: In fact, as I've said, we kind of lost- lost track of each other.

Miner: Mm-hmm. But it was- it was '89 or '90 when he got to Wesleyan.

Schlipf: This would have been shortly after.

Miner: Shortly thereafter.

Schlipf: It was shortly after that that we got back in touch.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: And then this group- it was up in Crystal Lake, north- northwest Michigan up near Sleeping Bear Dunes, near Benzonia. I don't know the area up there.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: They did a- a summer musical and they did ours.

Miner: Oh, that's great!

Schlipf: So-

Miner: And that got you- got the band back together.

Schlipf: That- that re-assembled the group, although I was the only one that made it to Michigan.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: And I can't remember why Minor couldn't, but it was either health or business and college. I- I just can't remember.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: I can ask my wife and she'll know.

Miner: Sure. Yeah.

Schlipf: The- but- so-

Miner: Well, the other thing that I guess- that I'm interested in is, I mean, since we can't talk exactly about acquisitions. I mean, do you want to talk a little bit about his- the library at Wesleyan? Before we started recording, you mentioned a few things. I don't know if you want to-

Schlipf: Well, I remember- I remember the old library.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: It had a lot of poured concrete and it had unbelievably horrible acoustics.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: The place was just like living inside a tin can.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: And they had sound-absorbing panels put up on the walls everywhere-

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: -trying to combat this. And in the- in the dead center was a small meeting room and the walls were just plastered with these panels trying to keep it from having too much reverberation.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: And I remember going there and sitting with Minor listening to something and it was- by then he had the white hair and the distinctive look of maturity. And I remember the room, thinking "Somebody should have stopped the architect from doing this." [Miner laughs] But I spent a lot of my life trying to stop architects from doing things and sometimes it succeeds and sometimes I really lose.

Miner: Hmm. Hmm. Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: And the- as a profession, dysfunctional design often goes unpunished.

Miner: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: People just don't talk about it. But I think it's because partly if you get a nice, new building, you don't want to talk to the world about what- what it's failures are.

Miner: Yeah. That's so true.

Schlipf: So I write articles about libraries gone wrong and I- in large part people don't appreciate it.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: 'Cause I'm trying to finish a book for the American Library Association, how to do a book on library buildings and it talks about what works and what doesn't work and the what doesn't work part makes people mad.

Miner: Interesting! Like what in particular? Can you give an example?

Schlipf: Sure. Skylights.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: Architects just love skylights.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: They're too bright by day and they're too dark by night.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: They're badly insulated. They are- they leak.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: And they reflect noise.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: You know, there's nothing much good to say about skylights.

Miner: Interesting.

Schlipf: And architects love skylights and they'll say, "Look at the glorious light!" and I'll say, "You can't use the computers." [Miner laughs] And so it goes.

Miner: Hmm. So what- the- the kind of library that we have at Illinois Wesleyan has certainly been remarked on as a beautiful building.

Schlipf: It's a handsome building-

Miner: And-

Schlipf: -and I can't say- you know, I've been in it twice maybe so I-

Miner: Oh.

Schlipf: So I can't say too much.

Miner: Sure.

Schlipf: I remember thinking that I found the rotunda, especially the kind of folly up on the roof.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: -which from the outside, people don't know it's got this vertical rotunda going all the way through-

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: -and I think they would look at it and say, "Huh. Why is that?"

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: 'Cause you see things like that in Europe, sort of meaningless circles of colonnades in the middle of nowhere.

Miner: Right.

Schlipf: What? There's one in Burgonel and they'd look and say "Why is that?" At any rate, there's a- the firm has done a lot of libraries, and, you know, apparently Minor had a- he was just amazing in his ability to get support from the university from- from wealthy companies.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: I don't think- of course, that's what a good college president does. It looks like he did it very well from what I could see.

Miner: A good job. Yeah.

Schlipf: He always had something new coming and he'd obviously lined it up himself.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: So what- that's a tremendous legacy 'cause nobody could afford to build their own buildings out of tuition.

Miner: That is so true.

Schlipf: Got to- wasn't there some student center building, library, a lot of other things all-

Miner: Yeah. They remodeled an old gym into a student center. So part of the thing about the library is- that's- that's been a...certainly something that people have talked about and reflect on even today is Minor's attitude towards books in a library.

Schlipf: Mm-hmm. They were important.

Miner: That they were- yeah, that they were important. Absolutely. A library should have books, keep books, never get rid of books.

Schlipf: In fact, he talked to me about that once-

Miner: Did he?

Schlipf: -'cause his- his belief in the permanent value of books.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: And he was unhappy about people even wanting then to propose in the future the digital revolution would take place.

Miner: Right.

Schlipf: And he thought that the physical book and the historic physical book was important. You know, reading an eighteenth century book and how much better to look at an original eighteenth century edition.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: So I remember that strong feeling, but I was a big- I mean, you can see the size of this library. For a public library in town this size, we had an immense collection, like a quarter of a million books.

Miner: Yeah. That's fantastic.

Schlipf: And that's why the building is- is crowded, 'cause it's crammed with collections and Minor and I found that in common. We both were- and it's not just a matter of an affection or a love of books. It was a feeling of the tremendous importance of books and the importance of physical books pretty much, not-

‘cause I could remember the two of us- you know when ducks court? [Miner laughs] They- they attack an invisible enemy together, sort of bonding.

Miner: Really?

Schlipf: So Minor and I sat, you know, happily attacking the same ideas.

Miner: How interesting.

Schlipf: I think if we agreed we might talk about it, but it’s quite fun to talk about it when you agree.

Miner: That’s so true.

Schlipf: So we were saying about how certain things are done and one of the things that- and people- people get in trouble. The director of the Berkeley Public Library just lost his job about six weeks ago after a really, really drastic weeding of the collection-

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: -and prevaricating about it. And the-

Miner: That’s never a good thing.

Schlipf: -about twenty years the director of the San Francisco Public library lost his job and one of the biggest issues was getting rid of about half the collection-

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: -’cause he had promoted and helped design a building that wouldn’t hold the collection.

Miner: That would not?

Schlipf: That would not hold all the collection so his idea was to get rid of it.

Miner: Mmm.

Schlipf: And the staff ended up with boxes of library books in their garages ‘cause they were so unhappy.

Miner: Oh my gosh!

Schlipf: And after all the dust settled, the director left.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: So at any rate, so Minor and I saw that very much the same way, that- I remember that long conversation about how much- how much we believed in real books.

Miner: And when would that have been? When he was contemplating a new library or after it was built or-

Schlipf: No. I can't recall. 'Cause I remember the conversation and when but I can't remember whether it was before or after Ames Library.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: Yeah.

Miner: Well, it's a- it's a tricky thing though for me to contemplate, you know, just to test this idea out on you 'cause the attitude that Minor had about the collection resonates on our campus today with certain faculty, and the library had since before Ames Library was built, the library collection had not been weeded.

Schlipf: Mm-hmm.

Miner: And it's actually something that's become an issue for- for us today because we have materials in the collection that are just frankly not, you know, fit to be there. But having this dialogue with people on campus is very difficult-

Schlipf: I'm sure.

Miner: -and certainly the part of the library that I work in and the- the joy that I have in- in working with the remainder of Minor's collection that we have post-sale is- is instilling that love, right?

Schlipf: Mm-hmm.

Miner: And in celebrating- I am very much a person who celebrates the physicality of a book. I love the book as an archive.

Schlipf: Well, as an archivist really you have to.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: That's- that's part of the job.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: That's neat.

Miner: It is. It is. And frankly that's where- that's where that sort of happens in our library. And I get good buy-in from parts of the faculty over others, but it is a- a- a touchy point on campus-

Schlipf: Sure.

Miner: -even today.

Schlipf: It's- it's difficult, and weeding an academic library in some ways is a lot harder than weeding a public library-

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: -'cause you never know. I was at the University of Chicago and I stumbled into a book in the stacks from about early in the twentieth century, had never been out, and I based an article on it.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: You know, just because. And I never would have found it if I had looked for it.

Miner: Right.

Schlipf: I was sort of mugging along in that section and I pulled a book off the shelf and I thought, "Wow!" And it was a German book on the history of printing.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: So-

Miner: The serendipity of browsing.

Schlipf: That's right, and, you know, and nothing replaces it.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: Especially if you didn't know you were looking for it.

Miner: Right. If you didn't know you needed it.

Schlipf: If you- if you know you're looking for it, that's one thing. But if- if you don't know it's there- remember, we had a book in the library I stumbled into, and it was "How to make-" well, Minor had model trains and I had model trains, and, you know. But- but we never talked about it very much.

Miner: I don't think he-

Schlipf: I think he told me he was reproducing one specific date in Akron, Ohio, and the trains were all ones you could have seen in- in Ohio at that particular day.

Miner: Oh. How interesting!

Schlipf: Probably it would be somewhere where you could see both steam and diesel-

Miner: Oh.

Schlipf: -'cause that's a common thing to pick a day of a 1957, or '54, or something. But I remember he told me the date, which I have long since forgotten. But that's what he was representing, this one day in history, and knowing Minor it was probably pretty accurate.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: It would have been- things that didn't exist then wouldn't be on his layout.

Miner: Sure. Yeah.

Schlipf: But- but I never saw it. I saw the lay out. But Minor was a person who always amazed me with his great enthusiasms.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: You know, he'd cross campus and see something and get all interested in it, read up on it, so- and that's- I just admire that kind of -

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: -you know, endless intellectual curiosity.

Miner: And I think that's an impression that certainly rang true with a lot of our alumni. Yeah.

Schlipf: And so- and unlike me, Minor had a lot of personal charisma I think. [Miner laughs] So that's- that's something that I think works very well as a college president.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: People think, "What a neat guy!"

Miner: Want to be on his team.

Schlipf: And it's great for students to be able to have a president that you're overjoyed to see crossing campus.

Miner: It sounds like he might have been that kind of personality at Carleton as well.

Schlipf: Well, yeah. He was a lot younger though.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: And so I don't- I can't talk about that. I don't know what I would- but I remember him as a guy across the hall who was fun to talk with.

Miner: Sure.

Schlipf: And we did projects together. And- and some of the things that he and his roommate did, like that...modeling World War II in the Pacific for three non-stop days with a plane field that took an entire dorm room.

Miner: That's incredible.

Schlipf: So I think it was- knowing the two of them, it probably was the roommate's idea.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: But Minor was a happy participant. I could see.

Miner: Sure.

Schlipf: So-

Miner: Well, is Dick Sommers- you said he came to the funeral and-

Schlipf: He came to the funeral.

Miner: Do you know where he's-

Schlipf: He was in- in the National War College. It was in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

Miner: Oh, even then. Okay.

Schlipf: And- but he's like me, you know, he's going to be a year younger than I am and I'm seventy-four.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: So he's going to be retired, but, you know, as a professor emeritus, people- people would know all about him.

Miner: Sure.

Schlipf: 'Cause people keep track of their emeriti.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: -whereas other people kind of get forgotten. So Minor's...I'm- I'm sure people would know Dick Sommers.

Miner: Okay.

Schlipf: And it was interesting. You know, his- his enthusiasm was tremendous ranks of Napoleonic toy soldiers, and all kinds of stuff. A complete set of the war of rebellion, which was the official documentary record of the Civil War from the US government and it runs through many shelves of books.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: And as you can see with the name of the set, the war of rebellion, this was very definitely a Northern name.

Miner: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: So when I meet people from the South, I always like referring to the War of the Rebellion-

Miner: [laughs]

Schlipf: -which is-

Miner: Get them going. [laughs]

Schlipf: Oh yeah. It's- the older I get the more fun it gets. Vaguely annoying.

Miner: Poke- poke a little bit.

Schlipf: Yeah.

Miner: See who gets- rile people.

Schlipf: That's right.

Miner: Well, did you know- so you said you didn't meet Ellen until-

Schlipf: Until- until they were married.

Miner: Did you know the children at all? His sons?

Schlipf: I met them.

Miner: Okay.

Schlipf: He said that- I think Minor had one brother if I remember correctly.

Miner: I thought he had a brother. I didn't know he had a sister.

Schlipf: He had a sister.

Miner: Okay.

Schlipf: I would say his sister was- she was an enchanting person.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: And- but we were a long way apart and I was a graduate student with absolutely no money.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: So, you know, when the initial good times kind of- what do you do?

Miner: Sure.

Schlipf: At any rate, but-

Miner: Well-

Schlipf: I- I emailed her a couple times in the last- three or four years ago and-

Miner: Did- did you find her?

Schlipf: Yeah.

Miner: Oh!

Schlipf: Well, it was- and people could find me too 'cause I have an unusual name.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: So I- almost every girl I ever dated sooner or later found me 'cause they could. [Miner laughs]
'Cause you google Fred Schlipf and that's me.

Miner: Right.

Schlipf: A girl I dated once when I was about fifteen and she was about thirteen-

Miner: Oh my goodness!

Schlipf: It was one time. I remember it very well, better than the latter parts of my life because it was-
anyhow-

Miner: Envable memory.

Schlipf: It was fun. We were both in a community theatre play-

Miner: At that time?

Schlipf: -at that time-

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: -as kids.

Miner: So you were- you had an early theatre interest. It wasn't just in college.

Schlipf: No. No. I was- I was in community theatre for years-

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: -in Fargo

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: And I tried it when I got to college, but Carleton took up too much of my time. I couldn't do theatre and by the time I was a senior I was kind of burned out a little bit and I realized if I got a B plus or a B minus, it was the same thing in the registrar's office. So I just, you know- and Carleton's the kind of place where they hated giving As with a passion. [Miner laughs] I'm reminded of that. But, you know, as I said, I didn't know anybody with less- with a GRE score less than about ninety-two or three.

Miner: That's incredible.

Schlipf: And we had grade points right down to C, just barely graduating.

Miner: Hmm. Hmm.

Schlipf: So Carleton was at that time I think extraordinarily unrealistic.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: They had people who were- all of us went to graduate school. We all got doctorates, and that- they- they gave us bad grades I think on general principle.

Miner: Hmm. Nobody could be perfect.

Schlipf: That's right.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: And when you talk to some of the old faculty, they say "Oh, remember so and so," but it would be the person who was the intellectual star of the class.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: And that was- that was interesting. But at any rate, I just decided "Oh, to heck with it all," and that's why I did the musical. I was saying, to have a good time. [Miner laughs] And if my grades suffer a little bit, so be it.

Miner: Well, yeah. You- you left sane. [laughs]

Schlipf: And I- I got a fellowship to the university of Chicago-

Miner: There you go.

Schlipf: -which has, what, nineteen Nobel prize winners.

Miner: Right.

Schlipf: So it was- it was fine. But it was easy compared to Carleton, so-

Miner: That's interesting, that UC was-

Schlipf: No.

Miner: It's kind of daunting to think that actually.

Schlipf: Yeah.

Miner: Well, you said that Minor didn't- you didn't really talk about collecting with him.

Schlipf: Not at all, except being in his house he nonchalantly pointed to a few things.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: By I remember books and musical instruments.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: And- but the-

Miner: And trains.

Schlipf: Yeah. But- I don't think the trains were a collection. I think they were a hobby.

Miner: Oh, okay.

Schlipf: I was the one who collected trains. I had toy trains all over the place. I think he was doing a historical recreation.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: So it really wouldn't be a collection. It would be a- a model.

Miner: Well, there were timetables in his personal collection-

Schlipf: Mm-hmm.

Miner: -when we auctioned it. There was a collection of timetables. And that's one of the things that- that I'm interested in is seeing did he- how did he use what he collected.

Schlipf: I don't except that I do remember that he told me his railway represented Akron, Ohio-

Miner: Sure.

Schlipf: -on one specific date in history and to do that you have to know the history of every piece of equipment you have. Did this diesel locomotive exist by that date?

Miner: Hmm. Hmm.

Schlipf: What would the number have been? What railway would it have been for? What- what steam engines were still surviving when- by that date?

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: If you want to do that, people typically pick a date in the 1950s-

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: -during the great transition from steam to diesel.

Miner: Hmm. But that's not something you do?

Schlipf: No. No. No. I like- I like European toy trains and-

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: It's more of a kind of a accumulation.

Miner: Sure.

Schlipf: So- but at any rate, that was Minor's interest. But I- we never- I don't think I saw the layout.

Miner: Hmm. Yeah. I just- I've heard people say that they would, you know, within five minutes of meeting them he would ask them what they collect-

Schlipf: Oh.

Miner: -and, you know-

Schlipf: I- I don't remember collecting. We may have-

Miner: Yeah. Sure.

Schlipf: -'cause I know he showed me- in the house he showed me books and musical instruments.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: But the- in terms of- I don't think we ever talked collecting. I may be- I may be wrong.

Miner: But-

Schlipf: But I don't recall it.

Miner: That's okay. Do you...have any pictures of him in your early years or-

Schlipf: Probably somewhere. I'm sure.

Miner: Yeah. Alright.

Schlipf: If I could find them, I'll tell you about them, but I could look.

Miner: Yeah. And then I guess the last question I have is do you have anything to add or other people that you could think of that I should talk to?

Schlipf: I would talk with Dick Sommers.

Miner: Okay.

Schlipf: His college roommate, who knew him vastly better than I did 'cause they were- I knew him 'cause I lived just across the hall from each other, so- and they were interesting people.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: So I think Minor was a- by that time I was- Minor was so very- he was a very careful student.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: And I was a little bit sloppier 'cause I was burned out. Then, of course, I went to the University of Chicago thinking I'll get a degree and go out into the field quickly.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: But I got seduced by the academic life at the University of Chicago which was very different from Carleton.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: And so I got a doctorate and came down here to teach. But the- but at Carleton I just got burned out-

Miner: Sure.

Schlipf: -and I think the difference was the University of Chicago was really interested in the life of the mind and Carleton at that time really wasn't.

Miner: Hmm..

Schlipf: It was- it was interested in hard work and getting bright students and being known for being a tough school.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: But I don't think- I don't have that feeling that "Isn't knowledge fun?"

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: I went to Chicago and I met the assistant director of the school and the first question he asked me was what I was going to do my research on.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: I thought, you know, I've been working in libraries. I've got no idea what research areas need to be done, or how it works, or anything. How can you ask what research I want to do?

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: And I realized later that's Chicago, of course.

Miner: Yeah. That's what they're interested in.

Schlipf: That's what they're going to do.

Miner: Yeah. Huh.

Schlipf: So that's a- that's a different- a different kind of feeling. I think I was a little too slap-happy for them at times.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: I know I was.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: But it's- it's- Chicago rather than Carleton that shaped my life.

Miner: Interesting.

Schlipf: At Carleton I had good friends and sweated things out.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: But you know the term "to swat?"

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: Yeah. That was Carleton.

Miner: Yeah. Did- do you think Minor felt the same way about it? That it was hard work?

Schlipf: I really don't know.

Miner: You didn't talk about that too much?

Schlipf: We didn't talk about that. Nope. I do remember though that he was- there were times that I said, "We've got to get this done for this musical," and he said, "I've got- I've got work I've got to get done." [Miner laughs] And I was just, you know, frankly cutting things a little close that semester-

Miner: Yeah?

Schlipf: -and Minor wasn't.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: And also I was admitted to the University of Chicago. I had a fellowship, and at that point- what, my last year, final grades didn't matter. As it was, they were the same as always.

Miner: There you go.

Schlipf: But he told me that I'd been swatting too much. [Miner laughs] But at any- but that was- yeah. But I remember Minor pushing- when you're a junior, the world is much more less certain than when you're a senior. And the fact once- once in early spring I got the fellowship and admission, I thought, "Well, that takes care of it." And so I wasn't in the position of being- having to worry as much about things. So I didn't.

Miner: That's great. Good place to be, better than the other one.

Schlipf: No. So- at any rate, Minor was around campus, and there was kind of a- seniors didn't have to take finals if they were satisfied with their grades-

Miner: Oh!

Schlipf: -in the last semester.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: And I looked at my grades and I thought, “This is okay.” So I just- I didn’t take the final. I had a space there of a couple weeks where there with- wasn’t really nothing much I had to do.

Miner: Huh.

Schlipf: And Carleton in springtime was- there were woodlands nearby, just beautiful, it was idyllic in Minnesota. And so I just had a good time.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: And that was, you know- one time I had an easy time at Carleton was there. But it’s- but I think the place has changed a lot.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: But they were in kind of an awkward transition from a college college to an intellectual college-

Miner: Interesting.

Schlipf: -and they still had a football team. I talked to somebody at one of the- a woman I know whose child is at Carleton, and she said, “They had a football team?” [Miner laughs] But when I was there they had required chapel.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: And they was- it was a- my brother went there and arrived three years after I graduated and required chapel was already done.

Miner: Oh, interesting!

Schlipf: But you could pick an alternative religion and attend, and so they had the Druid society, which was formed specifically to get around the chapel requirement because there was no way to exclude them without getting into trouble with all the other varieties that were originally available.

Miner: There you go.

Schlipf: And so I think one of the reasons they kind of quit is they were kind of caught in a cliffstick logically.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: But I- so I met the chief of the Druid when my brother graduated.

Miner: [laughs] That’s a great story too. Oh my gosh.

Schlipf: They called themselves reformed Druids 'cause they didn't do sacrifice. [laughs]

Miner: [laughs] I think I like this crowd of yours.

Schlipf: This wasn't- this wasn't me. This was-

Miner: Oh. Yeah.

Schlipf: -this was my brother's crowd. Happened after I left.

Miner: Oh.

Schlipf: But Carleton-

Miner: But you might have been in there where the seeds were being planted.

Schlipf: Carleton- I can't remember. I don't think Minor was a part of this, but I was part of a group that would get together at supper and tell bad puns.

Miner: Hmm. Hmm.

Schlipf: And we...so when we wrote this musical, it was just loaded with puns.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: The audience- the Carleton audience was very sharp and they didn't miss a thing.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: And it was full of misquotations from literature and- and misattributions of historical events and so on.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: And they picked up everything, even throwaways.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: But when the three of us got through with the script, there wasn't a spoken line that didn't have a joke in it somewhere.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: So we found that the audience reaction extended the performance time by almost a half an hour.
[Miner laughs] So that- that was fun.

Miner: That's great.

Schlipf: And we- we annoyed the heck out of the campus theater department because the best received production of the year was ours and it wasn't endorsed or supported by the theater department.

Miner: Oh dear. Well-

Schlipf: So we felt very smug about that.

Miner: -into each life.

Schlipf: And we also rehearsed people to death, and, you know, when Minor got through with them they were really singing professionally, and Gilbert and Sullivan is really light opera, you know. This is- this is not singing, you know, easy songs.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: And it's not that far from Tchaikovsky...[Miner laughs]...so- 'cause- 'cause after all, Sullivan was a classical composer. In fact, the operas were throwaways and he was going to be remembered for his- for his-

Miner: I did not know that.

Schlipf: -grand opera and for his other important music, all of which is forgotten except for the light opera stuff. Poor Sullivan.

Miner: I don't remember that.

Schlipf: Anyhow, I wish I knew- I could say something about Minor's collecting 'cause really it was something he and I never talked about.

Miner: That's okay.

Schlipf: And he didn't- the collections I remember in our- in our dorm room were all Dick Sommers' collections-

Miner: Oh. Oh, interesting!

Schlipf: -not Minor's.

Miner: That's amazing.

Schlipf: So-

Miner: Well, you know, knowing the experiences that you had with him in college and talking a little bit about all the- the characteristics I think, and the later years are really helpful, and I- I appreciate it.

Schlipf: It was fun. He was a- he was an engaging guy-

Miner: Yeah. Good.

Schlipf: -to say the least.

Miner: That's good. Well-

Schlipf: But I thought about this. I started to think, "What else could we talk about?" and I think we covered everything that was-

Miner: Okay.

Schlipf: The last real interchanges I had with- I remember with the three of us sitting around the kitchen table trying the doctor the script.

Miner: Hmm. And that was in the mid-nineties?

Schlipf: Yeah. I's have- I'd have to go back and see when it was performed because it was shortly before it was performed again.

Miner: Well, it was your last revision, right, that you had done to it?

Schlipf: Yeah. And that's- and I can go back and look it up and see if it's dated and I may somewhere be able to find when it was done. But- or-

Miner: I could contact Michigan. [laughs]

Schlipf: -we also- it was the guy who played MacBeth in our version that put it on up in Michigan.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: Come on Fred, think of his name. Knew him perfectly well.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: Steve Elrick. E-L-R-I-C-K.

Miner: Oh my gosh!

Schlipf: And he lived up in Crystal Lake, Michigan-

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: And he was a- he directing the shows every summer which was in part a way to involve all of the teenage kids into something.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: But the- the elite roles were often played by older people. It was definitely a summer- a summer event.

Miner: Mm-hmm. Hmm.

Schlipf: But they did three performances, so it was pretty well-attended.

Miner: So he would have been your classmate at Carleton?

Schlipf: Steve was in my class.

Miner: In your class, okay.

Schlipf: And see Minor and his roommate were one year behind me. But when school tries to have these alumni events to raise money-

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: -which, of course, is the main reason, I had friends in classes ahead of me and behind me, and so when they would try to get us to cohere as a class, it doesn't really work very well.

Miner: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Schlipf: So I send them the token money every year.

Miner: Sure.

Schlipf: But I give the big money to this library here instead because this is- this my baby.

Miner: Mm-hmm. This is where you-

Schlipf: This where I spent much of my life. I've spent almost half of my life in this building.

Miner: Isn't it an incredible legacy?

Schlipf: Yeah. I've lived in- I worked summers in the Fargo Public Library where I grew up and really full of nice people. And then I went to Carleton, and frankly the librarians weren't all that friendly.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: And then I went to the University of Chicago, and the librarians had terrible attitudes, and then I came to Illinois and the librarians had bad attitudes. I worked at the Chicago Public Library when I was in library school and the staff there had bad attitudes.

Miner: Oh my gosh!

Schlipf: So by the time I became director here, one main feeling was that everyone who walked into the library would have a warm and pleasant experience.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: And I had to work at it, because there were people who had been allowed to not to do that.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: I had to take them into my office and say, "Look, this is the only way it's going to work."

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: And somebody comes and you say, "How nice to see you!"

Miner: Mm-hmm. Well, I'd definitely say you succeeded. I've always felt welcome here. And I've never lived in Urbana. [laughs]

Schlipf: Well, that's the way it ought to be. It's a shame it doesn't happen in libraries.

Miner: Sure.

Schlipf: And I think it's a management screw-up.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: Because if people are unfriendly, you don't hire them.

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: You know, if you interview someone and the person has no social graces, you say, "Okay. Next."

Miner: Yeah.

Schlipf: And I got to the point where I interviewed everybody, including all the bookshelvers.

Miner: Hmm. Oh wow!

Schlipf: Because we had eighty or ninety employees and I interviewed all of them.

Miner: Wow.

Schlipf: But that was the- that was the way to ensure that everyone was always friendly all the time. And I'm talking too much. This is nothing about Minor.

Miner: That's okay. It was- letting people know what your expectations are is a good thing.

Schlipf: So, at any rate, he was an engaging guy and I wish I had been in closer touch because I had really- in that gap between when he came to Carleton and when he came to Wesleyan, we really hardly knew each other at all.

Miner: Hmm.

Schlipf: So I saw him again as a mature adult. I think he already had white hair.

Miner: Yeah. That's what you said. You said he had-

Schlipf: Yeah. Same engaging guy, but certainly with a lot of- a lot more backstory.

Miner: Hmm. Mm-hmm.

Schlipf: I hope you have really good luck with this.

Miner: Thank you. We'll go ahead and end it there.

Schlipf: Mm-hmm. Okay.